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"When you have Shakespeare, why do you need movies?": Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins* and an anti-Hamletian *Hamlet*

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Abstract

Neil Jordan has suggested that "when you have Shakespeare, why do you need movies?" This article seeks to highlight the analogies between some key themes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Jordan's *Michael Collins* in order to suggest how Jordan's question is, perhaps, ironic. Importantly, recourse to *Hamlet* is shown to supply an alternative method for the analysis of Jordan's film and, in turn, demonstrate how literature per se can be deployed as a critical tool. An important aspect of this discussion includes a psychoanalytical framework that draws upon the work of Slavoj Žižek and a concept termed "extimacy".

Keywords: Extimacy, *Hamlet,* terrorist, film, Žižek, *Michael Collins*, Neil Jordan. Shakespeare, Gerry Adams, Peace Process.

Résumé

Neil Jordan pose la question : « Quand on a Shakespeare, à quoi bon le cinéma? » Cet article vise à mettre en lumière les analogies entre les thèmes centraux de Hamlet *de Shakespeare et* Michael Collins *de Neil Jordan afin de souligner la dimension ironique de la question de Jordan. Il faut noter que* Hamlet *offre ici un nouveau prisme de lecture pour l'interprétation du film de Jordan et permet de démontrer comment la littérature en soi peut être utilisée comme outil critique. Un des volets importants de l'analyse consistera à appliquer une lecture psychanalytique qui s'appuie sur les travaux de Slavoj Žižek et en particulier le concept d'« extimité ».*

Mots clés : extimité, Hamlet*, terroriste, film, Žižek,* Michael Collins*, Neil Jordan. Shakespeare, Gerry Adams, processus de paix.*

Writing about his 1996 film *Michael Collins*[1], Neil Jordan asks: "When you have Shakespeare, why do you need movies?" However, by highlighting the analogies between some key themes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Jordan's *Michael Collins*, this article will suggest how Jordan's question is, perhaps, ironic. Indeed, the following discussion argues that recourse to *Hamlet* might supply an alternative method for the analysis of Jordan's film and, in turn, demonstrate how literature per se can be deployed as a critical tool. An important aspect of this discus-

1. Neil Jordan, *Michael Collins: Film Diary and Screenplay*, London, Vintage, 1996, p. 15.

sion includes a psychoanalytical framework that draws upon the work of Slavoj Žižek and a concept termed "extimacy", the relevance of which shall be explained later[2].

Michael Collins commences with the 1916 Easter Rising then charts events leading to the War of Independence with Britain, the Treaty with Britain, the ensuing civil war, and, finally, Collins's assassination in 1922. Interestingly, a paradoxical and retrospective association of *Hamlet* to these events was made in 1935 by the Irish poet and author Oliver Gogarty. Thus, when

> De Valera […] sent invitations "on behalf of the government of the Irish Free State" to attend "the unveiling of Oliver Sheppard's statue 'The Death of Cuchulain'" at the General Post Office on Easter Sunday (21 April) 1935 […] Oliver Gogarty […] wrote […] "Sir, I have received your invitation to a commemoration of a proclamation of a republic in the G.P.O. […] I must refuse to assist you in playing *Hamlet* when your Republicans are howling for *Macbeth*[3].

Gogarty's rebuke to de Valera implies that, albeit through gainsay, *Hamlet* supplies a metaphor within the events spawned by the 1916 Easter Rising. Moreover, even at a fundamental level, there appears to be several connections that can be identified in relation to *Hamlet* and *Michael Collins*. Such connections have been implied by Jordan.

Thus, according to Jordan, his film portrays its eponymous protagonist as being, like *Hamlet*, a "genuinely tragic figure […] heading towards doom[4]". Further, in terms of location, a parallel to *Hamlet* and Elsinore occurs with the narrative being largely restricted to one location: Dublin. As with Shakespeare's Elsinore, Jordan's reconstructed and bygone Dublin location is frequently summoned as being a Gothic space. For example, Luke Gibbons claims that:

> In *Michael Collins*, both film-noir and the gangster genre preside over the action. With its half-lit figures and moody expressionistic shadows, the alleys and back lanes of Dublin come to resemble the "mean streets" of urban America[5].

Without refuting Gibbons' association of *Michael Collins's* "film-noir" *mise-en-scene* to "the gangster genre", Jordan's portrayal of "half-lit figures and moody expressionistic shadows, the alleys and back lanes of Dublin" might also evoke elements of the gothic, chiaroscuro space often associated with the labyrinthine

2. Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 71.
3. Robert Tracey, "'A statue's there to mark the place': Cu Chulainn in the GPO", *Field Day Review*, n° 4, 2008, p. 211.
4. Neil Jordan, *op. cit.*, p. 7, 4.
5. Luke Gibbons, "Framing History: Neil Jordan's Michael Collins", *History Ireland*, Spring 1997, p. 48.

corridors and ghostly turrets of Elsinore, especially in film productions such as Laurence Olivier's (1948) or Grigori Kozintsev's (1964) *Hamlet*s. Other gothic spaces in Jordan's film include the catacombs where de Valera convenes his paramilitary army, the gloomy corridors of Dublin Castle where Ned Broy is tortured, the abattoir, Lincoln Jail, and the tunnel beneath the river Liffey through which Harry Boland flees just prior to his death. Furthermore, although not actually "shown" in either narrative, both Hamlet and Collins are dispatched to England by, arguably, betraying father-figures, Claudius and de Valera respectively, and shortly after their return both protagonists are killed: Hamlet by a poisoned foil and Collins, at a metaphorical level, by the "poison chalice" of the Treaty that acts as the catalyst to the Irish Civil War and Collins's actual murder[6]. Also mirroring *Hamlet*, Jordan's film to some extent embraces themes concerning surveillance, or spying, memories summoning an unjust past, a will towards revenge, and destiny or fate. This said, and Jordan's portrayal aside, it could be argued that the legend of the "real" Collins is, in some respects, that of the archetypal Renaissance man: a soldier, a scholar (an accountant and politician), and a lover.

However, commenting upon Jordan's film and, specifically, his portrayal of Collins, for Patricia Harty the legend of Michael Collins feeds "a certain desire to love the spectacle of defeat[7]". Whereas *The Sunday Telegraph* asserts that "Michael Collins was not a national hero but a brutal and bloody failure [and] a monstrous myth[8]". So, in a similar way to Terry George and Jim Sheridan's 1996 film about the 1981 IRA hunger strike at the Maze prison (*Some Mother's Son*), in 1996 the release of Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins* stimulated conflicting political stances which provoked both condemnation and praise. These political stances can be discussed and then associated with the film's subtext in respect of *Hamlet*.

Condemning the film, Austin Morgan suggests that *Michael Collins* is "*The Godfather* with shamrocks, [a] deeply flawed [film] that can only address the question of Ireland through romantic twaddle about the man-of-violence-who-turns-to-peace[9]". However, Luke Gibbons observes how:

> Jordan acknowledges the influence of *The Godfather,* which can be seen particularly in the intercutting between romantic interludes (the love interest or [future] marriage sequences) and the laughter taking place elsewhere[10].

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6. "Poison Chalice" quotation from Neil Jordan*, The South Bank Show*, London Weekend Television, 27 October 1996.
7. Patricia Harty, "Tears of Joy for Jordan", *Irish American*, 9 n° 2, 1993, p. 22.
8. *Sunday Telegraph*, 9 September 1996, [n.page. n.author]. Article from a portfolio of press cuttings supplied by Warner Brothers (Ireland).
9. Austin Morgan, "The Big Fibber", *Fortnight*, December 1996, p. 23.
10. Luke Gibbons*, op. cit.,* p. 49.

Yet, unlike Morgan, Gibbons does not consider this analogy to be a negative trait in the film. Hence, for Gibbons:

> Jordan works these allusions into the texture of the story, giving additional, often poignant, resonances to certain sequences. Hence the staging of the elimination of the Cairo gang in terms of the St Valentine's Day Massacre, a set-piece from gangster films, allows for an ironic prefiguring of Collins's own death at Beal na mBlath[11].

As shown through the Cairo Gang assassinations, when it comes to carrying out cold-blooded, ruthless acts Michael Collins is portrayed as being as capable as Michael Corleone. Both men are shown to be smart, determined, and to have the ability to think clearly and decisively when under fire. Both men command respect and seek legitimacy for their out-lawed organizations. Indeed, Gibbons has noted how:

> By reworking the image of the gangster in the light of both recent developments in the genre, and the aura surrounding Collins, Jordan's film has, in effect, lifted the crude, sinister associations off the stereotype of the "Godfather", thereby depriving revisionist demonology of one of its favourite tropes. […] Like the best historical films, it forces us to reconsider not only the past, but also many of the platitudes which pass for political analysis in the present[12].

Moreover, the *Michael Collins* narrative and *The Godfather* narrative, whereby the main protagonists are thrust into a bloody sequence of betrayal, revenge, and tragedy, are not incompatible with the *Hamlet* narrative. Collins, Corleone and Hamlet are all comparatively classical tragic figures who are thwarted by tragic flaws and an insatiable desire for vengeance.

Although Gibbons's reading of *Michael Collins* is largely well-disposed towards Jordan's portrayal of the Irish "past", as suggested by the aforementioned criticism from Harty and Morgan, the film unleashed a moral furor within some commentaries. For instance, Kevin Muir states that the film's "most offensive aspect [is the] reduc[tion] of "the IRA […] to a mass of depoliticized action heroes[13]". Harry Thompson is equally critical[14]. According to Thompson, Jordan depicts Collins (played by Liam Neeson) as being a "warm-hearted" individual and "de Valera" (played by Alan Rickman) as being "the 'wicked' Irishman who ultimately disposes of Our Mike[15]". Anthony O'Keeffe compounds this viewpoint when

11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
13. Kevin Mahr, "Greengrossers", *Guardian*, 16 January 1998, p. 10.
14. Harry Thompson, "And Here Comes Another IRA Hero", *Guardian*, 13 January 1998, p. 7.
15. *Ibid.*

he states how "de Valera is ludicrously demonized [and that] it was a little irresponsible of Jordan to implicate [de Valera] in Collins's death[16]". Moreover, claims Thompson, Jordan's de Valera "isn't really Irish, as indicated by Alan Rickman's strangled Blarney[17]". Indeed, the casting of British actors as villains provides the focus for Thompson's approbation. "Of course", states Thompson, "we've all known for ages that baddies, aliens and vampires in Hollywood movies have to come from Surrey[18]". In *Michael Collins*, Charles Dance's role as Collins's "English adversary" does seem to imply Jordan's ostensible demonization of Englishness. This is particularly apparent when Dance is shown "lit from below like Bela Lugosi and accompanied throughout by lugubrious cellos[19]". In terms of Neeson and Rickman, it could be argued that their former roles within other films do supply a certain Manichaean expectation of Irish hero versus English villain. Rickman's comment that "de Valera's single-mindedness is set against Collins's openheartedness" appears to also reflect this premise[20].

When it comes to Neeson playing the "good guy", the 1987 film version of Jack Higgins's 1981 novel, *A Prayer for the Dying,* portrays Neeson as a Horatio-figure, a loyal and stoic IRA friend to the angst-ridden and conscience-stricken IRA male protagonist. Whereas, in relation to a Manichean dichotomy of Irish hero and English villain, in *Schindler's List* (1993) Neeson is the eponymous humanitarian hero, the "good" self pitted against English actor Ralph Fiennes's portrayal of the Nazi "bad" other. And in keeping with the Celtic minority identity, *Rob Roy* (1995) shows Neeson as a Scottish hero pitted against Tim Roth's English villain. As for Rickman, his roles include a rather camp but highly villainous Sheriff of Nottingham in *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves* (1991). And his performance as a master terrorist in *Die Hard* (1998) is consistent with his performance as a master Irish republican rebel, de Valera, in Jordan's film. Thus, Keith Hopper observes how "*Michael Collins* […] comes replete with its own well-established generic values, star personas, iconography, and so on, which are mapped onto an Irish setting [then] recognized by the audience[21]".

Taking a more positive stance on Jordan's film, Mary Carolan praises *Michael Collins* for its representation of the eponymous protagonist as being "a respected military leader who knew when to make war and fight for peace and who made the transition to democratic politics with apparent ease[22]". Further, Simon Par-

16. Anthony O'Keeffe, *Fortnight*, December 1996, p. 26.
17. Harry Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
18. *Ibid*.
19. *Ibid*.
20. "*Michael Collins*: Production Information and Promotion Material", Warner Brothers, Ireland, 1996.
21. Keith Hopper, "'Cat-Calls from the Cheap Seats': The Third Meaning of Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins*", *Irish Review*, n° 2.1, Autumn/Winter 1997, p. 1.
22. Mary Carolan, *Irish News*, 18 September 1996, p. 7.

tridge commends the film for having "political significance […] today[23]". Collins's "political significance […] today" could, at the time the film was released, be read in conjunction with Gerry Adams and the Northern Irish Peace Process. Indeed, Adams's alleged involvement with the IRA is still (as evidenced in a recent article in the *Sunday Times*) a topic of twenty-first century political controversy[24].

According to Hopper, "*Michael Collins* coincided with the traumatic collapse of the Peace Process" and, therefore, "it was inevitable that critics (and audiences) […] would draw up their own, idiosyncratic set of parallel inferences[25]". For Hopper, these "idiosyncratic inferences […] includ[ed] reading Collins as a latter-day Gerry Adams[26]". Idiosyncratic? Maybe. But several critics of the film imply this notion is tenable. For instance, following her accusation that "the ruthlessness of the IRA under Collins makes the Provos seem benevolent", Suzanne Breen suggests how "Gerry Adams is a latter-day Collins, trying to make the transition from terrorist to statesman[27]". Morgan agrees with Breen and comments upon the way in which "at one level" Jordan duplicates "the 1994 cease-fire, with Collins the role model for Gerry Adams[28]". Additionally, as suggested by Steve McDonogh, it is "ironic" that the publicizing of Adams's autobiography, *Before the Dawn*, coincided with the "Dublin premiere" of *Michael Collins* which prompted "a hysterical attack on the film [by] elements of the British and Irish media[29]". Moreover, Jordan himself acknowledges how *Michael Collins* "is like a prism that reflects every development of the recent" 1996 on-off Peace Process[30].

As suggested above, political affinities between Collins and Adams are indeed evident and, depending upon the political point of view of the critic, the acknowledgment of such affinities can be presented in either positive or negative terms. It could be argued that, as Jordan implies, *Michael Collins* is a film that acts as a prism to the 1996 on-off Peace Process whereby Collins mirrors Adams in a celebration of rebels who make deals, who compromise. If so, Collins might be regarded as being "a complex mixture of stage Irishman and tragic hero, a Laughing Boy who unsmilingly planned assassinations, a terrorist godfather who became a national statesman[31]".

This link between Collins and Adams can be further explored through the structure of *Hamlet* and "extimacy". Jacques Lacan's "neologism" vis-à-vis "exti-

23. Simon Partridge, "Jordan's Moral Ambivalence", *Fortnight*, December 1996, p. 26.
24. "Gerry Adams and Me", Article reviewing *Voices From the Grave*, *Timesonline*, 2010.
25. Keith Hopper, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
26. *Ibid*.
27. Suzanne Breen, "Who is the real Michael Collins?"', *Fortnight*, December 1996, p. 7.
28. Austin Morgan, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
29. Steve McDonogh, *Open Book: One Publisher's War,* Dingle, Brandon, 1999, p. 190.
30. Neil Jordan, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
31. John Kelly, *The Sunday Times*, 15 September 1996, p. 8.

macy" is a useful concept here because "extimacy […] neatly expresses the way in which psychoanalysis problematizes the opposition between inside and outside, between container and contained [whereby] the Other is 'something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me'[32]". This Other or "*extime*" that is "strange to me" but also "at the heart of me" can be associated with desire and "*objet petit a*". According to Žižek "*objet petit a*", the little object that stands-in for desire,

> is produced as a residue […] of every signifying operation […] a hard core embodying horrifying *jouissance*, enjoyment, and as such an object which simultaneously attracts and repels us – which *divides* our desire and thus provokes shame[33].

Associated with these ideas, in *Hamlet* a young protagonist agonizes over ethics and the tragic implications of violent political action. Hamlet's desire (revenge) is an intimate part of the self. But it is also "other" to the liberal humanist self that embraces liberal humanist values such as the value of human life. Thus, Hamlet signifies both the self and other. This sense of the Hamletian self as an extimate figure is also signalled by his status as being, on the one hand, a royal prince within the court of Elsinore yet, on the other hand, a rebel who threatens the royal authority of Elsinore that is represented by Claudius. Jordan's Collins can be viewed in a similar manner. Collins's desire (the "bloody mayhem" that seeks to liberate Ireland) is an intimate part of the self[34]. But it is also "other" to the liberal humanist self that desires the freedom "to be a human being[35]". This desire is fore grounded during the scenes in which the murders of the Cairo gang are orchestrated. Here, spliced between the murders, scenes in a hotel bedroom show Kitty probing Collins's moral conscience about the murders which she describes as being "like so many Valentines, delivering bouquets" then asks: "Do they deliver a love note, Mick, with the flowers?[36]" Even though Collins has orchestrated the murders, the sombre tone of these bedroom scenes do not summon Collins as being a malicious assassin but rather as being someone who simply desires their "country" to become somewhere in which "To live in. To grow. To love[37]". Collins's extimacy is also located in, firstly, his role as an Irish rebel within the British empire (an enemy within) then, secondly, as a defender of the Treaty made with Britain that partitioned Ireland. Indeed, through his negotiation of the Treaty, Collins's extimacy is reversed because his Irish self and desire for Irish independence is othered through his desire to prevent further bloodshed, which results

32. Dylan Evans, *op. cit.,* p. 39, 71.
33. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London, Verso, 1997, p. 180.
34. Neil Jordan, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
35. *Ibid*., p. 133.
36. *Ibid*., p. 122.
37. *Ibid*., p. 123.

in an allegiance with the British other. In actual fact, the Treaty itself might be related to extimacy. Composed in Britain by the British yet affecting Ireland and the Irish, the Treaty is a symbol of "external intimacy" which, as a written document, is part of a "symbolic order […] striving for a homeostatic balance" (peace in Ireland) that cannot be "integrated into the symbolic order" (anti-partition)[38]. The Treaty is "the Thing", a "fantasy-object" or an object that

> by its fascinating presence, is merely filling out a lack, a void in the Other. There is nothing "behind" the fantasy; the fantasy is a construction whose function is to hide this void, this "nothing" – that is the lack in the Other[39].

Hence, in terms of Collins and his desire for peace, the Treaty symbolizes *objet petit a*, the little thing that stands in for desire but which, in turn, "*divides*" that desire (the partitioning of Ireland) "and thus provokes shame" not to mention "guilt". So, in spite of Collins's assertion that he "won't go to war over a form of words", Boland's fear about, "What if it's war either way, Mick?" is realized[40]. Thus, the "so-called reality" (Collins's desire for the avoidance of war) is actually negated by "the symbolic order" (the Treaty) and "the obliteration of the signifying network itself" (the ensuing split caused by the Irish civil war and the breakdown of negotiations with Britain). In fact, as noted by Stephen Kelly, following Collins's death de Valera launched an international Anti-Partition campaign during which he condemned the Treaty for being an "illegal act" which had "mutilated Ireland" and symbolized a "grievous wound[41]". However, perhaps ironically, de Valera eventually abandoned this campaign and went on to promote a less ambitious goal, that being, "the need 'to work for the [Irish] language', while partition was ignored[42]". This shift in goal could be viewed as the voicing of another form of desire that, once again, is prompted by a symbolic order: the Irish language. However, Gerry Adams's 1996 autobiography, *Before the Dawn,* also summons a sense of extimacy, an extimacy which further implies associations between Collins and Adams.

Before the Dawn contains a short story, a fiction through which Adams attempts "to capture […] something of the harsh reality of the campaign launched by the IRA[43]". The story's hero (Sean) is an Irish Republican sniper who, lurking in a Belfast attic, contemplates universal ethical issues. To kill or not to kill? To be

38. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 132.
39. *Ibid*., p. 132-133.
40. Neil Jordan, *op. cit.*, p. 137-138.
41. Stephen Kelly, *A Policy of Futility: Eamon de Valera's Anti-Partition Campaign, 1948-51*, *Études Irlandaises*, Autumn-Winter 2011, n° 36-2, p. 62-63.
42. *Ibid*., p. 70.
43. Gerry Adams, *Before the Dawn: An Autobiography*, London, Heinemann, 1996, p. 168.

or not to be? Murder or suicide? These three questions prompt Sean's philosophizing about morality. "Was it right to kill?" Sean asks[44]. He replies thus:

> No, he told himself, it wasn't right to kill. But there was no choice. Of course there was a choice. No one forced him to do what he was doing. He could leave now. Leave? What good will it do, staying there? No one would know and no one could complain. He'd have done his best[45].

Here, like Hamlet, Sean considers universal, ethical and moral issues and anxieties about the rights and wrongs of killing. His internal monologue as a split-subject humanizes the IRA sniper for a general readership. This general readership includes the British. And, as Adams is no doubt aware, Sean gainsays how many readers, be they British or Irish, would usually perceive an IRA sniper. Sean is *not* a "thick Mick stereotype", is *not* demonic, is *not* an unscrupulous and violent psychopath. On the contrary, even though Adams's young IRA hero is politically committed to the Irish Republican Cause, he is articulate, humane, and principled enough to debate the rights and wrongs of assassination. Adams's humanization of the IRA volunteer succeeds through the depiction of a standard dilemma that has been central to literature, fiction, and film since *Hamlet*. This dilemma hinges upon "action" as well as responsibilities, duties and issues of moral conscience: all of which problematize Sean's decision about whether or not "to take arms against a sea of troubles[46]". Hamlet's questions are Sean's questions and Adams enhances his fictitious hero's image by posing such a Shakespearean dilemma. Thus, it might be argued that *Hamlet* supplies an Ur-text for Adams and the dilemma of political action. Therefore, Sean's action performs an implicit political agenda which attempts to make readers acknowledge that sometimes, if the cause is just, a man can suspend his moral conscience and kill. In this way, the morally tortured protagonist who is capable of violence becomes both the hero and the villain. And this is precisely how Jordan chose to portray Collins. This is because, for Jordan, "goodness is essentially undramatic" and a "key" to "character" emerges when "the villain and the hero […] are merged into one[47]". Both villain and hero

> Michael Collins […] can embody both principles. A man with as many gradations within him as there are between black and white, someone who is at times appalled by his own capacity for violent action.

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44. *Ibid*., p. 170.
45. *Ibid*., p. 170.
46. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2008, III. 1, p. 59.
47. Neil Jordan, *op. cit*., p. 16.

> […] He could bury his grandmother in concrete and you would still sympathize with him[48].

Irrespective of whether or not Jordan depicts Collins, and by association Adams, as being a romantic, action-man hero, it could be suggested that the film contains another, perhaps unconscious, political agenda: the condemnation of politicians such as de Valera who *will not* make deals, *will not* compromise. British politicians such as Thatcher of course epitomize this intractable stance and in Jordan's text, while Collins is a representation of macho Irishness, de Valera's political intransigence is eventually fuelled by the jealousy of Collins and an implication of treachery against Collins. However, as claimed by Lacan, the political issues embedded in the film coalesce with a bizarre anti-*Hamlet* narrative. The following analysis of the film's leading male characters (Michael Collins, Eamon de Valera, and Harry Boland) demonstrates why this might be the case.

The political implications, Hamletian and paternal figures summoned by *Michael Collins* correspond with Marvin Rosenberg's claim that King Hamlet's "ghost comes to seem a symptom not only of national but also of the cosmic unrest that accompanies personal and political violence in other tragedies[49]". This allusion to "cosmic unrest" seems to attach a certain universalization to such tragedies. Moreover, Rosenberg's suggestion that Hamlet can be performed "like an unpredictable bomb urgent to go off" also appears to be significant[50]. This is because although Jordan's film shows how Collins is doomed to eventually self destruct, or deconstruct, the violent and, seemingly, inevitable tragedy inherent to Collins's fate is a metaphorical bomb whose detonation within the film enables the, geographically removed, British psyche to experience by proxy the North of Ireland in terms of a tragic narrative. Hence, through his fantasy figure of Collins, Jordan ostensibly provides British audiences with "an unpredictable bomb urgent to go off" not to mention "a genuinely tragic figure[51]".

As noted earlier, Jordan writes that his "central character" is a man "heading towards a doom that [is] inevitable[52]". So, Jordan's Collins does seem to represent a metaphorical bomb primed for self-destruction. Moreover, according to Jordan, the first draft of the screenplay "lacked an identifiable villain", lacked, perhaps, a "Claudius[53]". "Now this villain", states Jordan, "can only be the British […] Empire[54]". So it would seem that, at a conscious or unconscious level, an Irish

48. *Ibid*., p. 16-17.
49. Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Hamlet*, Cranbury; NJ, Associated University Press, 1992, p. 30.
50. *Ibid*., p. 135.
51. Neil Jordan, *op. cit.,* p. 7.
52. *Ibid*., p. 135.
53. *Ibid*., p. 4.
54. *Ibid*.

director and playwright has not only encoded *Hamlet* within his film but also inverted the duality of negative British representations of the Irish paramilitary versus positive representations of the British armed forces. Jordan's account of his [talk] with "James Callaghan" who appeared to find "the film quite loathsome" implies this may be so[55]. "Maybe", claims Jordan, British politicians "don't want this kind of activity on their shores[56]". Indeed, Jordan follows this comment with his words cited within the title of this article: "when you have Shakespeare, why do you need the movies?[57]" Here, Jordan's couched resentment of Shakespeare ironically affirms Shakespeare's cultural status and becomes a paradox. But although Jordan cannot make Shakespeare Irish, he can supply an anti-British and pro-Irish *Hamlet*. For example, a Hamlet and Horatio friendship *appears* to be rehearsed through Collins and his comrade (Harry Boland), especially when Boland predicts Collins's death with the words "you look like a ghost[58]". Moreover, recalling an analogy made earlier, like Hamlet Collins is sent overseas to England. And his remark about the journey involving a situation whereby he "signed [his] own death warrant" reinforces this analogy[59]. So too, the man responsible for Collins's journey and implicated by Jordan in Collins's death, that being, de Valera who is "a father to the Republic and a father to Collins" as well as "a father who will betray him[60]". Indeed, de Valera is implicated in the perpetration of Collins's death through a Claudian type of treachery. This said, Jordan's tragic hero is "doom[ed]" by two English "villains", the British Empire and a British actor.

According to Jordan, during the making of the film, Collins emerged as being "all things to everyone", once again implying the character's universality[61]. However, Collins's status as hero has been revised by Slavoj Žižek to suggest that Collins is, alternatively, a repetition of Claudius.

Writing about the psychoanalytical concepts of the imaginary, of the symbolic and of real fathers, Žižek highlights "the crucial shift from Oedipus to" *Totem and Taboo* then *Moses and Monotheism*[62]. With the Oedipus Complex, "the [imaginary] paternal figure prevents […] access to the maternal object[63]". "In the standard Oedipus myth, Oedipus is *the exception who did* […] kill his [imaginary] father" whereas in *Totem and Taboo we all did it*, that is, kill the real father of

55. *Ibid*., p. 15.
56. *Ibid*.
57. *Ibid*.
58. *Ibid*., p. 127.
59. *Ibid*., p. 137.
60. *Ibid*., p. 47.
61. *Ibid*., p. 30.
62. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London, Verso, 2000, p. 315, 317.
63. *Ibid*., p. 315.

enjoyment and inaugurate the symbolic father[64]. "Betrayal" is a key word here[65]. This is because *Totem and Taboo* insists upon "the structural necessity of parricide [whereby] the father is elevated into the venerated symbol of Law only after betrayal and murder[66]". So, "what the faithful follower should conceal from the paternal figure of the Leader is precisely the gap between the Leader", whose reality is "utterly impotent and ridiculous" […], and the symbolic place he […] fills[67]". Put simply, the only thing that can "assure" a Leader's "fame [is] betrayal[68]". However, Žižek observes how *Moses and Monotheism* supplies a development of these myths which, in turn, enables an alternative reading of *Michael Collins*.

Within the *Totem and Taboo* "matrix […] it is not enough to have the murdered father returning as the agency of symbolic prohibition" since for "this prohibition to […] actually exert its power, it must be sustained by a positive act of Willing[69]". Moreover, in *Moses and Monotheism* there are "*two* paternal figures" characterized by "the old Egyptian Moses […] and […] the jealous God who displays vengeful rage when He feels betrayed by his followers[70]". Thus, *Moses and Monotheism* inverts *Totem and Taboo* because "the father who is 'betrayed' and killed by his followers [or] sons is *not* the obscene primordial Father-*jouissance* but the very 'rational' father who embodies symbolic authority[71]". Ultimately, this means that "the symbolic authority […] [is] betrayed" then reactivated by "the jealous and unforgiving superego figure of God full of murderous rage[72]". Importantly, unlike the real father in *Totem and Taboo*, this superegoic father "says 'No!' to *jouissance* […] [and] *speaks* to His followers [or] sons" thereby emphasizing how "*voice* is crucial[73]".

In order to illustrate some of these notions in terms of "betrayal", Žižek supplies a brief reading of *Michael Collins* whereby "the relationship between […] Collins and […] de Valera […] illustrates [an] aspect of [the] necessity of betrayal[74]". For instance, Žižek claims that in 1921 de Valera faced a dilemma in which "he saw the necessity of concluding a deal with the British government, as well as the catastrophic results of the return to a state of war, yet he did not

64. *Ibid.*
65. *Ibid.*, p. 316.
66. *Ibid.*
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Ibid.*
69. *Ibid.*, p. 317.
70. *Ibid.*
71. *Ibid.*
72. *Ibid.*
73. *Ibid.*, p. 318-319.
74. *Ibid.*, p.316.

want to conclude this deal himself[75]". This is certainly implied in *Michael Collins* when, after returning with the Treaty, Collins tells de Valera "you sent me there because you knew [the terms] were the best we could get" and then protests how "otherwise you would have gone yourself[76]". For Žižek, de Valera's reluctance was caused by the danger of assuming "public responsibility" for a deal in which the British government would remain intractable and thereby expose "his impotence[77]". So, in order "to retain his [own] messianic charisma", de Valera sent Collins to forge "the deal" and thereby retained "the freedom to disavow it publicly" and protect his "charisma[78]". As Collins tells Boland in Jordan's film, "he [de Valera] knew they wouldn't give us it. That's why he sent me. He wanted someone else to bring back the bad news[79]". Hence, during the scene where Collins confronts the anti-treatyites, he declares how he has become de Valera's "scapegoat[80]". In this way, "the passionate nationalist idealist […] exploits and then betrays the pragmatic realist[81]". In terms of *Totem and Taboo*, de Valera disguises his impotent status as Leader through betrayal, whereas in terms of *Moses and Monotheism* he ensures that Collins's "symbolic authority" (the Treaty) is "betrayed" then reactivated qua "the jealous and unforgiving superego figure of God full of murderous rage[82]". This murderous Irish God is de Valera. Taken in conjunction with a Lacanian *Hamlet, Moses and Monotheism* can further explain Jordan's film.

As mentioned earlier, *Michael Collins* can be termed an anti-*Hamlet* whereby a Manichaean reversal of *Hamlet's* two fathers occurs. De Valera repeats King Hamlet. He is Ireland's father figure, a paternal authority whose initial commitment to legitimate means for establishing an independent Ireland through parliament and a conventional military strategy fails then becomes transformed into a more devious and violent strategy. This type of strategy is implied in *Michael Collins* through Collins's suspicions about being made a scapegoat together with de Valera's public appeal to reject the Treaty even though "Volunteers may have to wade through Irish blood[83]". However, like the Monotheistic God, in order to succeed de Valera must depend upon "a positive act of Willing" ("*voice*") and, paradoxically, "vengeful rage when He feels betrayed by his people[84]". This is evident when de Valera publicly rejects the Treaty and interpellates the will of the

75. *Ibid.*
76. Neil Jordan, *op. cit.*, p. 138-139.
77. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 315, 317.
78. *Ibid.,* p. 317, 316.
79. Neil Jordan, *op. cit.,*p. 137.
80. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
81. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 317.
82. *Ibid.*
83. Neil Jordan, *op. cit.,* p. 143.
84. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject,* p. 318, 319, 317.

"Irish people" to reject Collins who, in turn, announces: "call me a traitor if you *Will* [my italics][85]". Fittingly, then, the film shows Collins being ambushed and murdered by de Valera's comrades.

De Valera presents a complex figure of extimacy, especially when performed by a British actor. This sense of extimacy, American-Irish self and British other, is intensified by the fusing of Rickman's slightly camp Britishness to his slightly Yeats-look-a-like as well as Catholic clergyman Irishness. His ecclesiastical identity is portrayed during his clerical activities during the scenes where he is in jail. Here, Jordan summons a hybrid fantasy figure who embraces Irish Republican fanaticism together with English decadence. For instance, his implicit homosexuality is foregrounded upon his escape from jail which is facilitated by Collins and Boland. During this scene, Collins and Boland disguise de Valera as a woman. "Some died for Ireland. But Dev – he tarted for Ireland," quips Collins, adding: "I'll take you home again Kathleen[86]". As observed by Hopper, the allusion to Kathleen not only "pokes fun at de Valera's legendary sexual Puritanism" (a Monotheistic "No!" to *jouissance*) but also evokes "the mythic figure of Mother Ireland", a prophetically punitive and superegoic "Kathleen Ni Houlihan[87]". Jordan compounds this sense of de Valera's sexual Puritanism when the film shows him chastising Collins for using sexual expletives. So, when Collins announces that "the [prison-gate] keyhole's fucking jammed", de Valera retorts: "That's no excuse for obscenities[88]."

If de Valera is a reversal of King Hamlet, Collins is a reversal of Claudius whom Jordan enables to seduce Kitty Kiernan qua Ophelia with impunity; a fact which appears to have irritated Thompson who claims that in the film Neeson "wanders about and snogs Julia Roberts to the familiar sound of that jaunty Irish fiddle[89]". Furthermore, the "real" Collins is rumored to have been, like Claudius, a figure of *jouissance* or "legendary lasciviousness[90]". Indeed, according to Eoghan Harris, Collins was not a "sexless hard man" but a man who had several affairs with married women including Moya Llyewelyn and, more famously, Hazel Lavery[91]. Jordan's film omits these affairs; a gap in the text which Harris criticizes because "Collins without Hazel Lavery is like Hamlet without Ophelia[92]". This said, Tim Pat Coogan highlights the fact that such allegations about Collins's sexual promiscuity should be deemed questionable, claiming that "there is

85. Neil Jordan, *op. cit.*, p. 140-141.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
87. Keith Hopper, *op. cit.*, p. 26-27.
88. Neil Jordan, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
89. Harry Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
90. Keith Hopper, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
91. Eoghan Harris, "The man, the myth and the mistress, *Sunday Tribune Magazine*, 15 September 1996, [n. page]. Article from a portfolio of press cuttings supplied by Warner Brothers (Ireland).
92. Eoghan Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

strong, but not conclusive, circumstantial evidence that Collins and Moya were […] lovers" and that the affair between Collins and Hazel Lavery might have been "a fancy on her part[93]". However, despite the question marks hanging over the reality of Collins's sexual promiscuity, for the many disciples of historical anecdote Collins should epitomize an obscene figure *of* violence, *of* sexual promiscuity, and *of* treachery. Instead, Jordan creates a figure who is a monogamous romantic and everywhere the victim of treachery, the peacemaker and "pragmatic realist" who is forced to "go to war over a form of words[94]". Furthermore, it might be argued that the film suggests (vis-à-vis Collins) that it will need an Irish terrorist (such as Gerry Adams) who makes a good deal to save us all.

If Jordan's film shows de Valera as a demonized King Hamlet and Collins as a heroicized Claudius, the role of Hamlet is actually performed by Collins's tragic comrade: Harry Boland. Indeed, these various roles are implied by the film-stills showing promotional portraits of Rickman (de Valera), Neeson (Collins) and Aiden Quinn (Boland). In the original promotional stills by Warner Brothers, the actors submit three very different gazes which, in turn, summon three very different personas. Rickman as de Valera faces the camera but his eyes are slightly, and slyly, averted. This gives the impression that he cannot "look the viewer in the eye" and might have a guilty conscience. Indeed, his troubled expression suggests as much. Not so Neeson as Collins. With his arms folded defiantly, he stares boldly and heroically at the camera lens. However, both Rickman and Neeson portray a sense of "knowing the camera is there": a sense compounded by the bright studio light in the background. But the photograph of Quinn as Boland shows the actor's head and eyes turned away from the camera as well as the viewer. Moreover, Quinn is shrouded in a dark and ghostly background. His expression is brooding, melancholy, perhaps a little fearful. All in all, the image is rather Hamletesque. Further, as well as (like Hamlet) being forced to choose between two fathers (de Valera and Collins), Boland is also a rival with Collins for the affection of Kitty, the Opheliaen "love interest". Boland is certainly a tragic hero. He forfeits Kitty to Collins and, in choosing de Valera, also forfeits his life. Interestingly, his choice is based on the will of the people, a will that is symbolized by Mother Ireland, or the bad Gertrude, called forth by the Monotheistic King Hamlet in the form of de Valera.

Warner Brothers' promotional stills are in black and white, a technique that evokes a sense of the past and nostalgia. This article has suggested how the application of a literary framework, such as themes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and psychoanalytical theory can also supply a technique for reading Jordan's *Michael*

93. Tim Pat Coogan, *Michael Collins: The Man Who Made Ireland*, New York, Palgrave, 2002, p. 285, 288.
94. Neil Jordan, *op. cit.,* p. 137.

Collins and, in turn, evoke a sense of the past and nostalgia in which the concept of extimacy plays a key role. According to Gibbons, "the power of" Jordan's portrayal of Collins is that "it shows the complexities involved in what took place[95]". For Gibbons, these complexities involve the difficulties of "passing judgement on the events" which concern moral questions such as "are the assassinations, depicted with such graphic effect, murder or not?[96]". Gibbons also challenges the notion that "biographers" should avoid a narrative approach to Collins's life, insisting that:

> Historical accounts presuppose narrative or interpretive horizons which determine the relevance of what is included or excluded. Dispassionate, analytical modes of historical writing convey an impression of 'objectivity' […] because they are […] obscured by the welter of detail. By contrast, the dramatic economy of 'fictional' reconstructions is designed […] to accentuate these narrative forms, bringing to the fore the latent points of view which order – and orchestrate – the empirical data[97].

Thus, while not dismissing the importance of the analytical and the empirical, this article has suggested the ways in which narrative forms, such as those embodied within *Hamlet*, might offer another approach to the reading of biographical history. As argued throughout, these narrative forms contain important themes which may supply an alternative device for the understanding of how films such as *Michael Collins* might be read through a former literary framework.

95. Luke Gibbons, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
96. *Ibid.*
97. *Ibid.*